

# The Survival of Indigenous Spirituality in Contemporary Australia

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## Introduction

An Indigenous ‘spirituality’<sup>1</sup> has survived in Australia despite the impact of White colonial settlement since 1788. It is found in a multitude of forms, both because of the diversity of Indigenous communities in Australia and because it is an ethos of deep connections between one’s Ancestors, and land or ‘country.’ These connections are traced back to ancestral beings who formed the land through their deeds in ‘the Dreaming.’ Though the rites, songs, iconography, and sometimes even the stories themselves were suppressed and often lost among some communities, I argue that the subtle, near-intangible ethos was passed on. The forty-thousand-year-old spirituality could not be suppressed by two hundred years of colonialism. This spirituality was maintained through rites and religious institutions in many communities, but survived by other means among those where formal religion was destroyed. This spirituality has been *revived* in various forms, but nevertheless *survives* in the work of Indigenous activism, particularly the struggle for land rights. Indigenous national identities have remained intact and are imbued with spiritual significance.

When Governor Arthur Phillip and the First Fleet arrived in Australia in 1788, a narrative representation by Whites of Aboriginal Australians was instigated, one that still reverberates in the early twenty-first century. This description of the occupied Indigenous people is notable, amongst other things, for its lack of recognition of ‘religion.’ Indeed, in 1864 F.W. Farrar stated that the Aboriginal population had “nothing whatever in the shape of religion to distinguish them from the beasts.”<sup>2</sup> For the first eighty-three years after their arrival, White settlers, almost without exception, represented Australian Aboriginals as ‘religionless,’ speaking instead of ‘customs’ or ‘traditions.’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is a deeply contested term due to its apparent vagueness and I will offer a working definition later.

<sup>2</sup> F.W. Farrar, ‘On the Universality of Belief in God,’ *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society of London*, vol. 2 (1864), pp. ccxvii–ccxxii.

<sup>3</sup> Tony Swain, *Interpreting Aboriginal Religion: An Historical Account* (Adelaide:

This representation was in part informed by the Christian-centric model of religion, which prescribed a deity, a creed, and a church. It was not until Edward Burnett Tylor published *Primitive Culture* (1871), in which he proposed a minimum definition of religion as “belief in spirit beings,” that this began to change.<sup>4</sup> The notion of Aboriginal religion having ‘disappeared’ or being ‘lost,’ however, remains a significant part of the representation of ‘Aboriginality’ in popular cultural discourse.

In contemporary Australia the representation is different, though equally problematic. Contemporary Aboriginal Australians are frequently subjected to a more subtle, yet nonetheless equally misplaced religious critique and misrepresentation. Texts such as American Marlo Morgan’s novel-cum-memoir *Mutant Message Down Under* (1991) have gained significant popularity in New Age circles. The book depicts an Aboriginal people slowly losing their religion, as one White character claims: “[n]ow they still do not want to turn loose of their customs and old beliefs...Those who do straddle the two cultures are rarely successful. It is true they are a dying race.”<sup>5</sup> However, the protagonist (Morgan in ‘fictional’ guise) is accepted into the fold of the ‘Real People’ tribe, and taught their ways to ensure the survival of their ideas. The issue here is one of appropriation, which, as Christina Welch noted, is “perhaps no-where more fraught than with regard to the New Age and new age Pagan appropriation of indigenous sacred traditions.”<sup>6</sup> The contextual history of colonialism renders New Age appropriation of Aboriginal religious ideas, whether intentional or not, as colonialist. The popularity of Morgan’s book<sup>7</sup> makes this all the more pressing, as Aboriginal religions become both misrepresented and misappropriated. Their portrayal as either or both static and dying, or wise and needing a (White) patron, is not only false, according to the data discussed below, but problematic in terms of its assertion of non-

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Australian Association for the Study of Religion, 1985), p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Swain and Garry Trompf, *Religions of Oceania* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Marlo Morgan, *Mutant Message Down Under* (London: Harper Collins, 1995 [1991]), p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Christina Welch, ‘Appropriating the Didjeridu and the Sweat Lodge: New Age Baddies and Indigenous Victims?’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2001), p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Various internet sources state that around half a million copies have been sold by Harper Collins. The Dumbartung Report gives the same figure. See Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation, ‘First Report on Mutant Message Downunder,’ at <http://dumbartung.org.au/report1.html>. Accessed 12/12/2011.

Aboriginal (White) superiority as the inheritors and promoters of Indigenous religious knowledge.

Aboriginal spirituality is not static; Indigenous responses to settler culture and Christianity can be found with the notions of High Gods, the Earth Mother, and the practice of Christianity. Aboriginal cultures are vulnerable to being essentialised or else mistaken for 'invented traditions.' Indigenous people have drawn upon English words like 'wellbeing' and 'spirituality' because they are the nearest translations of Aboriginal concepts. Ecological language has been utilised because there are similarities in aims and worldview. This is, however, due to an 'elective affinity' or fit between the two, and reduction of one to the other is detrimental to any serious attempt at understanding Aboriginal religion and spirituality.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Effects of Colonialism on Aboriginal Society and Culture (1788-1938)**

Contrary to one of settler Australia's longest standing myths, *terra nullius* ('the empty land'), enshrined in law until the *Native Title Act* (1993),<sup>9</sup> Aboriginal Australians lived, utilised, and laid claim to all parts of Australia. They were a visible presence in all the beach-heads of White invasion. They could be found in Sydney Harbour and Botany Bay (Sydney), in Port Philip Bay and the banks of the Yarra (Melbourne), the Brisbane River and Moreton Bay (Queensland), as well as the Torrens (Adelaide) and Swan (Perth) rivers and all along the coasts of the continent as well as the hinterland.

The effects of White settlement varied across Australia; in many far inland areas, Indigenous communities were left largely intact, with missionaries acting as the main European influence. Thus communities like the Aranda, Yolngu and Gurindji often maintain a more 'traditional' lifestyle: hunting, 'going walkabout,' and performing ancient rites such as initiations, which serve to pass on ancient ceremonies, Dreaming stories, and songs. One

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<sup>8</sup> Between June and September 2008, I conducted research for a dissertation project in Religious Studies at the University of Edinburgh in Sydney (with the aid of staff at the University of Sydney). I was able to conduct some field work at the end of this period in 'The Block,' an area of the suburb of Redfern owned by the Aboriginal community over a fortnight. Thanks to their helpful staff I was able to discuss spirituality and other aspects of Indigenous life with elders at the community centre. I also had many fruitful discussions with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics on these issues. I refer to the results of this fieldwork throughout this essay; any mistakes or aberrations are my own.

<sup>9</sup> Marion Maddox, *God Under Howard: The Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005), p. 165.

Aranda elder, Ngitji Ngitji Mona Tur, described how she was trained in the song cycle (*inna*) as a child, passed down to her by her female relatives. The structures of the song are not only important but also the *mayu* ('flavour').<sup>10</sup> Hokari observed that the Gurindji still travelled in accordance with ancient patterns, a product of the idea of the whole country rather than one's house as 'home,' and the obligation to renew the Ancestors' creations through one's travels, as opposed to purely economic motivations.<sup>11</sup> Gurindji elders still engage in the practice of sitting still and attempting to listen to the land.<sup>12</sup>

Though Australia was first colonised in 1788, settlers were not able to expand much into the interior until 1829. One reason is that, in the east, the mountainous Great Dividing Range blocked their advance.<sup>13</sup> Even though south-eastern Aborigines did not live far into the centre, they were far enough from the coast. Early settlement was for a long time slow to expand out of the major coastal centres: Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, and Adelaide. Thus, even many coastal communities like the Kamilaroi and Yuin remain as distinct peoples, with much of their traditions intact.

Many coastal Aborigines, on the other hand, particularly in the south-east, were devastated by White settlement, and subject to sporadic persecution, atrocities, and arbitrary removal of children from their parents in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (a phenomenon referred to as 'the Stolen Generations'). Though there was intermarriage in many areas, Aboriginal girls were often raped by White men,<sup>14</sup> and usually the children of mixed parentage were raised by Aboriginal mothers. Hence, many Aborigines in the south-east have White ancestry. Nonetheless, as they were raised by Aboriginal families, they are culturally Aboriginal. These Indigenous peoples often live in or close to settler

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<sup>10</sup> Ngitji Ngitji Mona Tur and Simone Ulalka Tur, 'Conversation: Wapar Munu Mantaku Nintirringanyi – Learning About the Dreaming and Land,' in *Sharing Spaces: Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Responses to Story, Country and Rights*, eds G.W. Worby and L.I. Rigney (Perth: API Network, 2006), pp. 160-161.

<sup>11</sup> Minoru Hokari, 'Gurindji Mode of Historical Practice,' in *The Power of Knowledge, the Resonance of Tradition*, eds L. Taylor, G.K. Ward, G. Henderson, R. Davis, and L.A. Davis (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2005), pp. 211-213.

<sup>12</sup> Hokari, 'Gurindji Mode of Historical Practice,' pp. 208-209.

<sup>13</sup> Donald Dennon, Philippa Mein-Smith, and Marivic Wyndham, *A History of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific* (Malden MA: Blackwell, 1988), p. 83.

<sup>14</sup> L. I. Riordan, 'History Wars/Race Wars: The Stolen Generations, Contemporary Racism and the Question of Difference,' in *Sharing Spaces: Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Responses to Story, Country and Rights*, eds Gus W. Worby and Lester-Rabinna Rigney (Perth: API Network, 2006), p. 124.

towns and cities. Many of the languages of these communities have been lost, or are spoken by a small percentage of the population. Such communities speak English with a particular accent and dialect.

The Aboriginal nations (tribes) of the Sydney area did not survive intact because their populations were decimated by disease, genocide, and dispossession from their lands. As early as 1789 smallpox wiped out much of the population of Sydney Cove (estimates are as high as 90%). The local Cadigal clan was reduced to three individuals from over sixty by 1791,<sup>15</sup> and this was not the last epidemic to strike the Aboriginal population. Despite this, Aborigines were a visible presence in Sydney until the 1830s and a small band camped at Circular Quay until forced out by 1881. The Aboriginal population largely abandoned central Sydney until the twentieth century but settled in the western suburbs and the area of La Perouse in the south. There were Aboriginal camps in Manly, Narrabeen, and by the Hawkesbury River in the north, some of which were closed by local councils as late as the 1950s.<sup>16</sup>

After the founding of Sydney, the colonists provoked more frequent conflicts with Aborigines as they expanded westward. They parcelled out land they regarded as their property, cutting off traditional hunting grounds and sometimes competed for the same game. In the western area near Parramatta, Aborigines began to raid the settlers, burning crops, attacking livestock and buildings, largely because they were losing access to their means of survival. War raged after 1795 when settlers fought pitched battles with Aboriginal guerrillas. In 1808, Governor King gave the order to drive back all Aboriginal populations west of the Georges River.<sup>17</sup> Similar patterns of settlement, dispossession, and genocide were repeated throughout the colonial history of Australia. In general, Aboriginal people became largely invisible in Sydney and other major cities by the mid-nineteenth century. Aborigines had to re-organise their entire society, as whole nations and clans were destroyed, and survivors had to join other groups. Therefore, their distinct cultures and religions were lost.<sup>18</sup>

States and Federal authorities forced various policies on Aboriginal peoples throughout Australia in an attempt to solve the 'Aboriginal Problem.'<sup>19</sup> They were moved on to reserves, outstations, and missions. They were

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<sup>15</sup> Melinda Hinkson, *Aboriginal Sydney: A Guide to Important Places of the Past and Present* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2001), p. xix.

<sup>16</sup> Hinkson, *Aboriginal Sydney*, p. xix.

<sup>17</sup> Hinkson, *Aboriginal Sydney*, pp. 140-141.

<sup>18</sup> Hinkson, *Aboriginal Sydney*, p. xix.

<sup>19</sup> Hinkson, *Aboriginal Sydney*, p. xxiv.

subjected to missionisation throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Whether they were settled on a mission or not often affected how Christian they were or how much traditional practices, language, and stories survived.<sup>20</sup> Reserves are sometimes referred to as ‘missions,’ whether they were run by a Church or not. The traditional culture, including language and all aspects of religion, were suppressed. Until the 1970s Aboriginals in certain regions were not allowed to read or carry any book other than the Bible.

It was initially thought that Aborigines were a dying race that had to be isolated, and they were placed in segregated reserves from the 1880s onward.<sup>21</sup> In New South Wales, the Aborigines Protection Board was set up, which administered all Aboriginal reserves in the state from 1909. Indigenous people were largely forced into these institutions and had no right to unemployment benefits as did other citizens. Instead they were given basic rations handed out exclusively on reserves. Aborigines did not have freedom of movement and could only enter or leave a reserve with the permission of the White manager.<sup>22</sup> Later it became clear that Aborigines were not a dying race and Australian governments embarked on an oppositional policy of attempting to assimilate Aborigines into the settler population.<sup>23</sup>

Government agencies often differentiated between ‘half-caste’ and ‘full blooded’ Aborigines and treated them differently. This culminated in the Stolen Generation which continued for over a century and only officially ended in the 1970s. The policy was designed to assimilate mixed-race children into the White community and abandon their Aboriginal identity.<sup>24</sup> It was justified by alleged cases of mixed-race children being abandoned by their Aboriginal mothers.<sup>25</sup> The NSW Aborigines Protection Board had the power to remove any child under eighteen arbitrarily from their family without parental consent. It is estimated that around two thousand children were removed between 1909 and 1938.<sup>26</sup> Thousands more children were removed in other parts of Australia and this practice, or its racial motivations, are no longer seriously in doubt. The 1997 *Bringing Them Home* enquiry argued that between 10% and 35% of Aboriginal children were removed from their families from 1910-1970,

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<sup>20</sup> Diane Bell, *Ngarindjeri Wuruwarrin: A World That Is, Was, and Will Be* (North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1998), pp. 112-116.

<sup>21</sup> Hinkson, *Aboriginal Sydney*, p. xxiv.

<sup>22</sup> Hinkson, *Aboriginal Sydney*, p. 112.

<sup>23</sup> Hinkson, *Aboriginal Sydney*, p. xxiv.

<sup>24</sup> Riordan, ‘History Wars/Race Wars,’ pp. 112-113.

<sup>25</sup> Riordan, ‘History Wars/Race Wars,’ p. 124.

<sup>26</sup> Hinkson, *Aboriginal Sydney*, p. 113.

depending on the geographical location, and all Indigenous families had experienced some effect of these policies.<sup>27</sup> This practice was declared genocidal under a United Nations treaty ratified by Australia in 1948.<sup>28</sup> Genocide does not require killing; it is the systematic attempt to destroy a culture or an ethnic, national, linguistic or religious group. One method condemned by the treaty is the forcible transfer of children from one social group to another.<sup>29</sup> On February 13, 2008, the Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, issued a formal apology to the Stolen Generation.

### **Evidence for the Survival of Aboriginal Spirituality**

Despite this, a sense of Aboriginal spirituality survived among Indigenous people, even in the most 'settled' parts of Australia. Overt traditional religious practices and institutions by and large ceased in these areas, but this did not mean that knowledge and beliefs could not be passed on, even among self-identified Christians. Even where specific beliefs and stories were lost, I argue that a specific spiritual *ethos* was maintained, where country and other aspects of heritage are imbued with a deep and subtle spiritual significance. I was told that many people practiced Christianity while the sun was up and at night practiced the "debil debil"<sup>30</sup> (Kriol for devil, but used to refer to 'spirits') religion. One of Bell's Ngarindjeri informants, Veronica Brodie, described how her mother believed in both Christianity and "her culture,"<sup>31</sup> presumably using this term to placate missionaries.

I here offer a working definition of religion as based on belief in and relations with alternate realities (spirits, deities, other realms and so on) outside ordinary time and space, which cannot be falsified by empirical means. Crucially these beliefs and practices are part of the identity and institutions of an identifiable community.<sup>32</sup> The traditional Aboriginal religions clearly qualify as religious under this definition. 'Spirituality,' in my definition, involves relations with, or beliefs in, alternate realities that are internalised in

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<sup>27</sup> Riordan, 'History Wars/Race Wars,' pp. 115-116.

<sup>28</sup> Vicki Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing: A Framework for Governments' Aboriginal Heritage Activities Report* (Minimbah Consultants and Education Providers for the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation, 2006), p. 33.

<sup>29</sup> Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, p. 33.

<sup>30</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, 'Jesus and the Dingo,' in *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions: Ethnographic and Historical Studies*, eds Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose (Adelaide: AASR, 1998), p. 364.

<sup>31</sup> Bell, *Ngarindjeri Wuruwarrin*, p. 109.

<sup>32</sup> James Cox, *From Primitive to Indigenous* (London: Ashgate, 2007), p. 164.

the individual and without institutional support. It is an aspect of religion that has drifted outside the confines of structure. Further, 'spirituality,' as it is often used, is usually more experiential and not based on systematic beliefs.

Spirituality is often associated with the rise of individualistic forms of 'religious' expression in Western cultures.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, it is not the sole preserve of that milieu and could be taken up by an indigenous people like Aboriginal Australians, who still profess a communitarian worldview. In my view Aboriginal cultures have not lost that worldview and Indigenous people now use the term 'spirituality' to express the ethos that has continued to be part of Aboriginal life, despite the decline of formal religion. This reflects how contemporary elders use these terms. Many elders state that the missionaries took their religion from them by banning the ceremonies, though all Indigenous people I met asserted the continuing importance of spirituality in their lives. They testified that the spirituality was still very, very strong and that "Blackfellas are full of spirituality."

Aboriginal religion was not static, and scholars argue both White culture and the Christian religion produced traceable reactions within Indigenous thought. Kolig argues that totemic Dreaming Beings were inflated into the so-called 'High Gods' encountered usually by missionaries.<sup>34</sup> He notes the anomalous nature of beings described as 'above' the totemic system which runs through the whole Indigenous ontology and cosmology, though many of these deities possess totemic elements, such as Bundjil, the eagle-hawk who was the totem of many peoples in Victoria.<sup>35</sup>

Swain reaches similar conclusions, noting the inclusion of cattle icons in the Bora ritual dedicated to the High God Baiami. These icons were symbolically speared in the ritual and this practice may be due to the establishment of pastoral settlements on Aboriginal territories.<sup>36</sup> He also argues that earlier contact with Indonesian Makassan people helped to introduce and indigenise a group of Mother Goddesses among the Yolngu of northern Arnhem Land. Swain further contends that some heroes of Cape York are of

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<sup>33</sup> Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, 'Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket: The Social and Public Significance of New Age Spirituality,' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2006), p. 212.

<sup>34</sup> Erich Kolig, 'Religious Power and the All Father in the Sky: Monotheism in Australian Aboriginal Culture Reconsidered,' *Anthropos*, vol. 87 (1992), p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> Kolig, 'Religious Power and the All Father in the Sky,' p. 18.

<sup>36</sup> Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 140.



Torres Strait Islander origin.<sup>37</sup> The significance of these phenomena is that they show that Aboriginal thought was never static. Indigenous Australians could mould aspects of their traditions in reaction to outsiders or to accommodate them, their worldviews, and homelands.<sup>38</sup>

The next section is based on the accounts of several local Aboriginal women from Nambucca on the north coast of New South Wales about their life in the area. These recollections from women living during the twentieth century show how Indigenous spirituality, practices, and beliefs remained among Koories (a collective name for Peoples of much of South Eastern Australia) living in a south-eastern coastal area, albeit often in subtle and non-overt forms. The last corroboree held in the region was as late as 1951, and numerous other Aboriginal practices remained. The father of Valerie Davis-Smith was a traditional healer who was able to heal a sick boy, baffling doctors. She also was instructed to take certain precautions against sorcerers, such as avoiding leaving personal objects lying around, and ensuring that these objects are never burned. Avoiding casting a shadow over a gravestone ensured one was not plagued by ghosts.<sup>39</sup> She recalls a visit by her cousin Teddy and his friend Benjie, who later attempted to summon spirits and made the mistake of moving a sacred stone from its position. The spirits attacked Teddy, only being subdued by Valerie's father. Teddy was left with an injury to his arm that could not be healed and would repeatedly break out at certain times.<sup>40</sup>

The local Aborigines of the area knew to avoid walking in certain places at certain times, like at night. The elders of the area still taught the young people bush medicines, girls were taught about women's business at a local cave, and many sites in the area were sacred to women.<sup>41</sup> Fay Davis (b.1940) remembered the elders warning the young people about certain omens, such as the mopoke which predicted death and the black cockatoo which predicted rain.<sup>42</sup> Ann Flanders-Edwards, (b.1945) from the Aboriginal camp at Bowraville racecourse, maintained that her ancestors were buried there and she reported that their spirits are still present. She also maintains the tradition of burying all afterbirths in the grounds of the racecourse, and goes there to be strengthened or healed. She also takes each newborn child in her family and

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<sup>37</sup> Swain, *A Place for Strangers*, pp. 282-283.

<sup>38</sup> Swain, *A Place for Strangers*, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> K. Schilling, S. Partl, and D. Byrne (eds), *Aboriginal Women's Heritage: Nambucca* (Hurstville: NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2003), p. 1-4.

<sup>40</sup> Schilling, Partl, and Byrne, *Aboriginal Women's Heritage*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>41</sup> Schilling, Partl, and Byrne, *Aboriginal Women's Heritage*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>42</sup> Schilling, Partl, and Byrne, *Aboriginal Women's Heritage*, p. 7.

introduces them to their ancestors and to the land. She believes it is important to teach her grandchildren to respect their ancestral land and to maintain the relationship. Many of her relatives had a reputation for possessing healing powers.<sup>43</sup>

Alma Jarrett (b. 1924) and Amy Marshall Jarrett (b. 1943) remembered how the elders would interpret various omens; that the owl could mean bad news, the kookaburra rain, and the carpet snake, the totem of their clan, the Ballangary, warned them about news concerning the clan. They also warned the young people about strange blue lights which they would talk to in 'lingo' (the Aboriginal language).<sup>44</sup> Emily Walker (b.1934) remained attached to her totem, the possum, and was given a piece of possum fur by the midwife when she was born. According to Emily, many local Aborigines go to the local cemetery to speak with their ancestors, though she feels her mother's spirit is with her at all times and acknowledges a connection with the land, which she maintains she does not own but owns her. She argues that all Aboriginal people are deeply spiritual and rely upon the spirits throughout their life. Though not all Koori people may be fully aware of their spiritual heritage, Emily argues that they express it in some way. She writes poetry and convinced a woman she knew that her spirituality was expressed through her painting.<sup>45</sup>

Jessie Williams (b.1924) was born to a Gumbayngirr mother and a father from another nation who had to go through a Gumbayngirr initiation in order to marry her mother. Taboos were strictly enforced and young male initiates were not allowed near their female relatives for a certain period.<sup>46</sup> An elder told me about how she had a sixth sense. Once she had a vague feeling in her stomach. It turned out that she had left the cooker on but luckily had taken the pot off. Sometimes while playing cards she was drawn to the right cards. She described how many people in her community could heal and that she had done so herself. I also met a Koori academic who told me that the totem of her grandfather was the crow and that whenever she sees a crow she feels that her grandfather is present and protecting her. Diane Bell's informant Veronica Brodie knew of and felt a connection to her clan *Ngatji* or totem, the pelican.

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<sup>43</sup> Schilling, Partl, and Byrne, *Aboriginal Women's Heritage*, pp. 12-14.

<sup>44</sup> Schilling, Partl, and Byrne, *Aboriginal Women's Heritage*, pp. 16-21.

<sup>45</sup> Schilling, Partl, and Byrne, *Aboriginal Women's Heritage*, pp. 25-27.

<sup>46</sup> Schilling, Partl, and Byrne, *Aboriginal Women's Heritage*, p. 28.

### **The Growth of Koori Politics and the Renewal of Aboriginal Culture and Spirituality (1938 to Present)**

Aboriginal culture and spirituality may have been temporarily subdued and latent for a comparatively short period, depending on the community and context, from roughly the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. It was soon to emerge once again and build up steadily, thanks to the rise of Aboriginal political movements. These political movements largely replaced the Church as the main galvanising force in Aboriginal life. Missionaries often taught Koories to be meek and to accept their fate and as a result were derided as lacking in self-respect. The attempts by many Churches to stamp out much Aboriginal culture and spirituality, and limit knowledge to the Bible alone, proved unsuccessful and ultimately detrimental to conversion. Many Churches carried out or were complicit with the policies leading to the Stolen Generation.<sup>47</sup> Practice of Christianity was often left at the gates of the reserves when people left for towns and cities. I asked my informants whether this was the case and they concurred. I did not personally meet any Koori people who are practicing Christians. However, there are notable exceptions to this; the famous activist Mum Shirl Smith (1921-1998), for example, was a devout Catholic and worked closely with the priest of the Church in Redfern, Father Ted Kennedy. Today, most of the Churches, including the Catholic Church, recognise the value of Aboriginal culture and spirituality to an extent.<sup>48</sup> One bone of contention with the Church, as expressed to me, is that authorities do not allow the Aboriginal parishioners to incorporate their traditions as much as they desire to. Yet Indigenous symbols, voices, and ceremonies were incorporated into Pope Benedict's visit to Sydney's World Youth Day in 2008. The Pontiff was welcomed into Sydney Harbour with a 'welcome to country' ceremony.

These political movements, however, became the galvanising bond, uniting Indigenous Australians from all over the country. The Aboriginal flag of black and red horizontal bands with a golden sun at its centre has become the defining symbol of Aboriginal identity. The Torres Strait Islanders (a Melanesian People both linked with modern Aboriginal Australians and considered distinct) have a different flag; two thin bands of green at the top and bottom with a traditional headdress above a star, on a field of blue. Representatives of Indigenous peoples now base themselves in Canberra, in the famous tent embassy that sits on the lawn of Old Parliament House, marking a

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<sup>47</sup> Riordan, 'History Wars/Race Wars,' p. 116.

<sup>48</sup> Bell, *Ngarindjeri Wuruwarrin*, p. 114.

permanent site of protest.

This tradition of protest arguably began in the Sydney suburb of Redfern, which, thanks to the drop in agricultural employment in the early twentieth century, absorbed an influx of Aboriginal migrants from many communities<sup>49</sup> largely from New South Wales, such as the Waradjuri, Kamilaroi, Bundjalong, Yuin, and others. It was from here that the Aboriginal Civil Rights Movement was launched, with ‘The Aborigines Conference Day of Mourning’ on the sesquicentennial Australia Day,<sup>50</sup> 1938. Central to this was a campaign for full citizenship; in 1967, Indigenous Australians were counted as citizens for the first time, having previously been counted under “flora and fauna.”<sup>51</sup>

The Redfern community began to set up Aboriginal services in 1971, the Aboriginal Medical Service, Legal Service, Koori Radio and the Aboriginal Housing Company. Granted funds by the Government in 1972, the Housing Association bought an area of housing for the community known as ‘the Block.’<sup>52</sup> In 1975 a group of striking Gurindji stockmen, led by Vincent Lingiari, were granted land. On the bicentennial Australia Day in 1988, Indigenous Australians converged on Sydney to protest and highlight the history of colonialism.

In 1992, a group of Torres Strait Islanders from Murray Island, led by Eddie Mabo, won a landmark case giving them Native Title to their ancestral territories. This was the first case to recognise a claim to territory based on indigenous history. It rejected the fallacy of *terra nullius*, that Australia was an empty land before colonisation. Native Title cases have been heard in courts all over Australia. Crucially, the Mabo case was based on the recognition of a religious tradition, that all land was connected to the ancestral being Malo-Bomai, divided among the clans by the totems he instituted in the Tagai, and still recognised by the claimants as the basis of their land system.<sup>53</sup>

An Aboriginal elder on Wellesley Island emphasised the continuity of the spiritual tradition during a 1997 land claim. This shows that Land Rights cases are based on recognition of Country and usually Ancestors.

Our Law is not like the Whitefellas law...It is the sea. That sea it

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<sup>49</sup> Hinkson, *Aboriginal Sydney*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>50</sup> The 26<sup>th</sup> of January, celebrating the arrival of the British ‘First Fleet’ in 1788.

<sup>51</sup> Hinkson, *Aboriginal Sydney*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>52</sup> Hinkson, *Aboriginal Sydney*, pp. 85-86.

<sup>53</sup> Nonie Sharp, ‘Malo’s Law in Court: The Religious Background to the Mabo Case,’ in *Religious Business: Essays on Australian Aboriginal Spirituality*, ed. Max Charlesworth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 176-177.

knows. Rainbow knows as well. He is still there. His spirit is still watching today for law breakers. That is why we all have to look after the sea and make sure we do the right thing.<sup>54</sup>

It could be argued that these claims are merely ‘opportunistic’ and based on politico-economic motivations alone, and that the claimants feel no spiritual connection to the country. One cannot deny the possibility of this; political, economic, and social aims motivate land rights, but not exclusively.

The first claim rests on the idea of ‘invented traditions,’ where individuals claim comparatively modern practices as part of an ancient tradition. The problem with the invented tradition approach is that it often focuses on specific customs in isolation (for example, Victorian additions to British monarchical rituals<sup>55</sup> rather than the institution of the monarchy itself). Though Hobsbawm and Ranger, along with others, did much to reveal that apparently ancient customs have often been recently invented and should not always be taken at face value, there is at least an implication that all traditions are invented. An institution such as the Monarchy is a ‘tradition’ in the wider sense, while specific practices may be better described as ‘customs.’ The theory should perhaps be re-branded ‘invented customs theory.’

In Australia, and other colonial contexts, this theory has been drawn upon to argue that Indigenous peoples merely ‘invent’ their traditions to further political ends, which in itself is drawn upon to protect the interests of the dominant White settler culture. This argument hinges on the dubious claim that Aboriginal culture could be almost entirely eradicated, despite the comparatively short time frame; that *nothing* of importance could be subtly passed on from a culture that existed for over forty thousand years on the other side of the world from the radically different invading culture. As most communities continued to live on or near their country, at least until the twentieth century, it would be surprising if country and its network of sacred sites could lose *all* of its intangible significance.<sup>56</sup>

I argue that to take invented traditions theory to extremes, to deny that traditions exist, is tantamount to arguing that different cultures and discourses cannot be maintained (and cultures are *maintained* by their members through education and other means). Though the argument attempts to tackle essentialist notions of ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’ as static, homogenous, and

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<sup>54</sup> Kenneth Jacob [1997], quoted in Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, p. 38.

<sup>55</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1-14.

<sup>56</sup> Marion Maddox, ‘What Is A “Fabrication”? The Political Status of Religious Belief,’ *Australian Religion Studies Review*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1998), pp. 5-16.

entirely closed to influence, it is almost as naive. One does not have to essentialise these notions to employ them and recognise that they have an existence. Many Aboriginal rites and customs have had to be revived in some communities, but only because the notions of Aboriginal tradition and country possess a spiritual potency for Aboriginal people.

Traditions can be recognised as having an existence in much the same way as cultures, religions, and other human products in a non-essentialist manner. It is because a tradition is composed of different discourses or elements that individuals can focus on or highlight those elements that fit their interests. However, this can rarely be entirely arbitrary and must be legitimated, usually with reference to the tradition. The claims of Indigenous people to their ancestral lands, based on continuing spiritual connections, are an example. Aboriginal spirituality is based on the idea of a deep connection to country (and thus the Ancestors) and almost all Indigenous Australians are familiar with their national background and thus their specific country. It is difficult to imagine that if national identity was maintained, that the qualitative inter-subjective features of that identity could not be maintained also. For example, many organisations have been set up to reunite stolen children with their families and help them to recover aspects of their heritage they have lost. Aboriginal identity has been reclaimed by many who had lost it, which thanks to the political movements are asserted with pride. Even in these cases, many aspects of Indigenous cultures were maintained. The act of repairing the damages in knowledge and identity wrought by such policies can be viewed as the self-maintenance and preservation of an existing subdued culture, rather than a 'revival' of the past. The fact is that Indigenous peoples are capable of influencing each other, as well as being influenced by the dominant settler culture, particularly in meeting places such as Redfern.

Koori identity is not arbitrary, however, and an elder explained to me the criteria under which individuals are considered Aboriginal. To be regarded as Indigenous, a person must have Aboriginal descent and must identify themselves as such. In turn, they must be identified by their community as an Aboriginal person. If an Indigenous person goes to live in a different town or settlement it can take a while before they are accepted as a member. She told me that when she first came to Redfern at a young age she had to "go through the mill." It is possible to speculate that this period of waiting is like a kind of initiatory process.

It is sometimes noted that Indigenous activists often draw upon environmental language to legitimate both their claims to ownership and the validity of their tradition. This does not mean that the ecological claims being made are false; rather, there is an 'elective affinity' between certain Aboriginal

discourses and modern Ecological thought. Elective affinity is a concept derived from Max Weber, proposing that two independent sociological elements or processes can reinforce each other if they share common goals.<sup>57</sup> Weber argued the nascent capitalist economy was aided by the nonconformist Protestant desire to be frugal, work hard, and demonstrate that they were chosen by God.<sup>58</sup> I would argue that there is a similar elective affinity between Indigenous ideas of respect for the land and Ecological aims of environmental preservation. It does not mean that these Indigenous concepts are derived from Ecological thought, or vice versa. That these two discourses have been known to draw upon the other's language is due to affinity and influence, not derivation. As Adams and English discuss, the National Parks and Wildlife Service of NSW and Indigenous lands rights activists have not always been in agreement,<sup>59</sup> particularly where conservationists seek to restrict access to natural sites.<sup>60</sup>

Swain argues that Indigenous people have taken up the idea of a Mother Earth figure in recent years.<sup>61</sup> He does not argue, however, that she has displaced the Ancestors; rather like the High Gods, she is a reaction to aspects of the modern world. She is developed out of pre-existing Aboriginal ideas and symbols rather than being created out of nothing. As noted before, many Aboriginal people believe in God, as well as their Ancestors.<sup>62</sup> Morris argues that the elasticity of Aboriginal culture, in particular the recounting of Dreaming stories, is one of its key elements. As an oral art form it was intended to be interactive to the needs of performers and audience, to be able to be re-created and adapted. She argues that the attempts at codifying and fixing the oral art form are detrimental to its survival.<sup>63</sup> Cultural heritage can consist

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<sup>57</sup> R. H. Howe, 'Max Weber's Elective Affinities: Sociology Within the Bounds of Pure Reason,' *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 84, no. 2 (1978), p. 366-385.

<sup>58</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Unwin University Books, 1930), p. 27.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Adams and Anthony English, 'Biodiversity is a Whitefella Word: Changing Relationships Between Aborigines and the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service,' in *The Power of Knowledge, the Resonance of Tradition*, eds L. Taylor, G. K. Ward, G. Henderson, R. Davis, and L. A. Wallis (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2005), p. 92.

<sup>60</sup> Adams and English, 'Biodiversity is a Whitefella Word,' p. 87.

<sup>61</sup> Tony Swain, 'The Mother Earth Conspiracy: An Australian Episode,' *Numen*, vol. 38 (1991), p. 5.

<sup>62</sup> Swain, 'The Mother Earth Conspiracy,' pp. 13-21.

<sup>63</sup> Christine Morris, 'The Oral Tradition Under Threat,' in *Aboriginal Spirituality: Past. Present. Future*, ed. Anne Pattel-Gray (Blackburn: Harper Collins, 1996), pp. 29-31.

of physical and observable places, symbols, practices, objects, and historical events to which the community in question lays claim, but much of it is intangible.<sup>64</sup> Though there has been increasing recognition of the tangible aspects of Aboriginal cultures, including an association with traditional lands, traditions, dance, art, and so on, there is little recognition of the intangible aspects of this heritage.<sup>65</sup> That much of these physical and observable phenomena are expressions of more inner meanings and values should be obvious as with any culture.

Wellbeing is a widely used concept in social policy and everyday language and has become increasingly used by Indigenous Australians. It refers to factors impacting physical health and mental health, other than medical conditions such as the environment surrounding an individual, and the freedom to flourish. It has been argued that, because of this distinction, wellbeing issues should be tackled whether they impact on health or not (though it is assumed that it more than likely will).<sup>66</sup> Cultural factors and spirituality affect wellbeing because they are linked to environments. Cultures have ingrained ideas of environment and ecosystems, inculcated through practices and narratives.<sup>67</sup> Attached to these are more subtle and intangible forms of heritage that could be referred to as spirituality; linking people to environments and imbuing practices with meaning and a sense of attachment. It has gained wide recognition that wellbeing is culturally determined.<sup>68</sup>

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 1991 recognised that Indigenous peoples have non-material and spiritual factors affecting their wellbeing. In Australia, the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (NACCO) emphasised that health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians included “the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community,”<sup>69</sup> as well as the physical needs of an individual. This was echoed by other reports and statements from public bodies and community organisations, that the Aboriginal conception of health was wider than the clinical and individualistic English word.<sup>70</sup>

Aboriginal ideas and concepts have clearly survived the cultural dominance of the colonial culture, and the prevalent representation of

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<sup>64</sup> Morris, ‘The Oral Tradition Under Threat,’ pp. 29-31.

<sup>65</sup> Morris, ‘The Oral Tradition Under Threat,’ p. 26.

<sup>66</sup> Morris, ‘The Oral Tradition Under Threat,’ pp. 11-14.

<sup>67</sup> Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, p. 14.

<sup>68</sup> Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>69</sup> Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, p. 19.

<sup>70</sup> Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, pp. 16-20.



Aboriginal culture as doomed. English words such as ‘wellbeing’ and ‘spirituality’ are simply the English terms which best describe Aboriginal ideas and do not fit them completely. Therefore, Aboriginal use of these words takes on particular nuances and meanings. The term ‘Dreaming’ to translate *Alcheringa* is a case in point. Linguists have pointed out that there is no translation of ‘health’ in Aboriginal languages, the closest in Nurwugen (Northern Territory), for example, may mean strong, happy, knowledgeable, socially responsible, beautiful, and clean. The word implies a good, balanced, functioning person.<sup>71</sup>

A 2005 Government report, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage*, spent much time consulting with Indigenous communities and leaders. Many consultants emphasised the need to recognise the cultural heritage aspects of wellbeing, particularly the importance of access to traditional lands. Country and attachment to it continues to be one of the pillars of Indigenous spirituality in Australia.<sup>72</sup> It has become increasingly recognised by public bodies that Indigenous communities have a unique input and involvement in environmental management as traditional owners, and that these should be incorporated and addressed. This interest comes out of the inherited ideas of respect, care, and maintenance of country and, indeed, of a group’s water territory or sea country. This goes beyond specific identifiable sacred sites, though they are still important to many communities. These sites are related to Dreaming tracks and other aspects of heritage. In many communities the wellbeing of the land is also a concern and can be uplifted or harmed.<sup>73</sup>

Grievs consulted with a focus group of twenty-three urban Koori people twice in May 2006 at the Eora College in Chippendale (an adjacent suburb to Redfern). Though not all were Redfern residents and some were born outside Sydney, all had lived in inner Sydney for a long time. The group participated in a discussion and were given a questionnaire in the first session and discussed the results in the second.<sup>74</sup> Both genders and different age groups were represented, as were different indigenous ethnic groups: Kamilaroi, Yuin, Waka-Waka, Dunghatti, Wiradjuri, Wajuk, and Bundjalong. Many chose to identify themselves simply as Aboriginal or using one of the regional labels: for example, Koori, Murri, Nyoongah.<sup>75</sup>

In the first questionnaire participants were asked to place factors in

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<sup>71</sup> Grievs, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, p. 20.

<sup>72</sup> Grievs, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>73</sup> Grievs, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, pp. 36-38.

<sup>74</sup> Grievs, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, pp. 39-41.

<sup>75</sup> Grievs, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, pp. 39-41.

order from 1-20 according to how these affected their wellbeing, assuming that their basic needs for housing, health, food, and clothing were provided for. The factors included socioeconomic issues such as housing, education and employment, health and social adjustment issues connected to race, and issues connected to intangible cultural heritage such as knowledge of indigenous heritage and culture, visiting land and sacred places, and Aboriginal values and spirituality.<sup>76</sup> Spirituality scored highest as a first preference (8/23), followed by knowing family history (7), and being with extended family (6). Scoring equally were: knowing and exercising my rights as an Aboriginal person, giving to family and friends, and knowing about my history and culture (5).<sup>77</sup> All of these factors were identified by Grieves as aspects of the intangible cultural heritage which scored overwhelmingly higher than material factors. Grieves also analysed the figures according to those that scored between 1 and 10. The top scoring factors were spirituality (22), knowing about my people's history and culture (19), knowing family history, knowing and using my rights as an Aborigine, and being able to give to family and friends all scored 17.<sup>78</sup>

Surprisingly, visiting land and sacred places only scored 5 for women and 1 for men. At the second meeting this was discussed and it emerged that this was largely because as city dwellers, they did not have access to them. This could mean that if they were more accessible they would score higher.<sup>79</sup>

Overall, these explanations of the factors that improve Indigenous wellbeing amongst the focus group are testimony to the continuation of Indigenous culture in this very urbanised group of Indigenous men and women, and the importance of tangible and intangible cultural heritage in their wellbeing.<sup>80</sup>

The participants defined 'spirituality' as an inner feeling of wholeness and peace tied to their identity, and an understanding of the environment and their culture. It is felt when around family and country, and it is based on relationships with one's community, the environment, and cultural heritage. It involves accepting oneself and others, being accepted as well as respecting the elders and traditional Law. It gives the indigenous participants a sense of belonging to their country and community. The participants also defined their spirituality as involving a relationship with the Ancestors, who created

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<sup>76</sup> Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, pp. 41-43.

<sup>77</sup> Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, p. 44.

<sup>78</sup> Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, p. 47.

<sup>79</sup> Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, p. 46.

<sup>80</sup> Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, p. 65.

Australia for succeeding generations.<sup>81</sup>

Spirituality is generated by being around your ‘mob,’ your family and people, and being connected (or re-connected) to Aboriginal culture and events. Being around other Aboriginal people brings comfort and security. One participant described it as “my feeling of wellbeing is increased by spirituality when I feel one with the earth and can walk around calm and content in this world.”<sup>82</sup> Spirituality acts as a guiding force which directs one on a moral path in life. It is connected to a deep and ancient religious system of belief that is passed on to succeeding generations through an Aboriginal upbringing, though it can be incorporated later in life.<sup>83</sup> Participants also identified with Aboriginal values which they often juxtaposed with western values: valuing spirituality over materialism, sharing with others “based on an unspoken reciprocal system,” emphasising respect and identifying with kinship.<sup>84</sup>

It becomes clear that these people as a group are driven by some core values that are very different, even antithetical, to the values of the modern western society in which they are located, even submerged....However, these cultural factors are not often articulated by individuals, they are just lived.<sup>85</sup>

The Aboriginal rights movement is also connected to spirituality and cultural heritage because Indigenous spirituality involves enhancing the lives of individuals and communities as well as ideas of respect for land and tradition. Grieves’ respondents described knowing and using their rights as an empowering act which strengthened their wellbeing and connections to their communities. The land rights movement is about access and control of land, but this also contains a strong spiritual component linked to tradition. Aboriginal rights campaigns are also linked to traditional values of respect.<sup>86</sup> There is an elective affinity between the political, social, and economic aims of the land rights movement and spirituality, as there is with the Ecological movement.

Knowing about and re-connecting oneself with family and kin groups is also influenced by this spirituality. It is an expression of an attempt to heal the rifts caused by White cultural imperialism, in particular the stolen generation,

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<sup>81</sup> Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>82</sup> Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>83</sup> Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>84</sup> Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, pp. 57-58.

<sup>85</sup> Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, p. 66.

<sup>86</sup> Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, pp. 55-56.

and to ensure the survival of Aboriginal culture, tradition, and spirituality.<sup>87</sup> Though the spiritual ethos, knowledge of, and respect, for country and many of the Dreaming tales have survived all over Australia, there have been many revivals of ancient rites and practices in recent years where they were lost. I met a community worker in Redfern who told me that she and many others have revived the ancient religious practices, particularly smoking ceremonies that are used for births, christenings, graduations, funerals, and many other occasions. As has been shown with the Nambucca examples, even in the coastal region ceremonies and corroborees were often current until recently (as late as 1951).

### Conclusion

Spirituality remains an important part of Aboriginal life and identity among the many diverse Indigenous communities found throughout the continent. It is an ethos based on connection to ancestral country as imbued in the stories, songs, visual art, rites, and other traditional practices which can be linked back to the Ancestors. Despite the suppression and loss of such institutions among many communities in heavily occupied parts of Australia, it survived in more subtle forms of connections to sacred places and living close to country. It re-emerged with the political movements along with other elements of Aboriginal culture in the twentieth century and with the decline of missionary influence. It is most famously expressed in the land rights movement, as an attempt to reclaim country and possesses an elective affinity with the politico-economic aims of the movement. It is tied up with wellbeing, intangible cultural heritage and identity, and attempts to reverse the effects of oppressive practices such as the Stolen Generation. This survival directly contravenes the White representation of Aboriginal people as doomed to extinction, and of Aboriginal religion as either non-existent or fragile and needing White patronage to survive into the future. In the twenty-first century we can see that this White portrayal is flawed and problematic; the evidence from Indigenous cultures indicates that a strong and vibrant spirituality is still present.

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<sup>87</sup> Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing*, pp. 52-53.